

# CULTURE INDUSTRIES: CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

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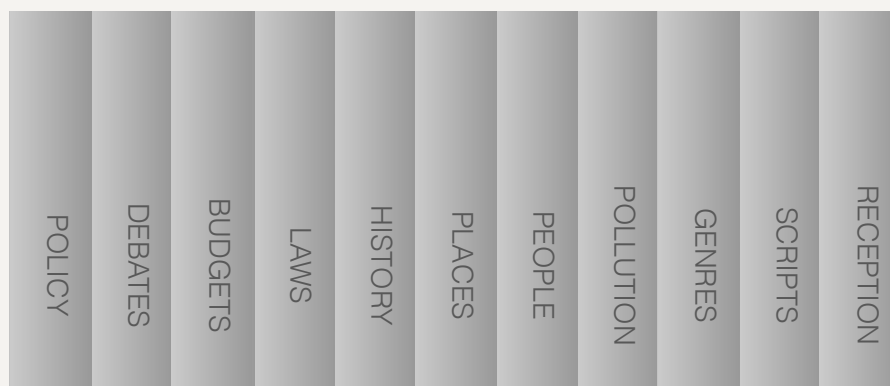
Irresistibly enchanted by a seeming grassroots cornucopia—struck by the digital sublime—many cybertarian technophiles attribute magical properties to today’s communications and cultural technologies. These beguiling toys are said to obliterate geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy in an alchemy of truth and beauty. A highly deregulated, individuated post-modern cultural world supposedly makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from confinement, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows billions of flowers to bloom in a post-political Parthenon. In this Marxist/Godardian wet dream, people fish, film, fuck, and fund from morning to midnight; the mass scale of the culture industries is overrun by consumer-led production; and wounds caused by the division of labor from the industrial age are bathed in the balm of Internet love.


True believers in technological liberation from corporate domination argue that the concept of the culture industries in particular and the categories of radical social theory, such as those of political economy, class, dialectics, emancipation, and socialism, are outmoded and need to be replaced with and displaced by novel theoretical and political perspectives, ones that are better suited to the kind of post-industrial world we live in, a world where the creative sector —among other things—is stimulated via small businesses and new machines permit person-to-person and person-to-population communication.

This thread presents a different agenda for studying culture and the culture industries in particular, one that is grounded in a distinctly cultural studies materialist reflexivity. Cultural studies is probably best understood as the politically committed, theoretically grounded, and radically self-reflexive and historical-materialist analysis of cultural processes and practices, where the commitment to imagine a humane, socialist society has always been a guiding assumption in the field from its early formations in post-war Britain. We understand Cultural Studies not just as an academic discipline, a particular approach within the wider field of the study of culture (one with implicit, but distinctive epistemological assumptions and ways of working); it is also a political project that seeks to construct what Larry Grossberg calls somewhere a "radical political history of the present."

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## TOWARDS A CULTURAL STUDY OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRIES: A Research Resources Guide/Chart





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In line with the above commitments, this thread therefore proposes to be radically contextualist/historical, thematically internationalist, politically socialist, and methodologically and theoretically multifarious and yet robust (if you prefer rigorous) and coherent, in order to account for and engage with the specificities of the current historical conjuncture, where changes in culture are being likened to a new Industrial Revolution and the Civil and Cold Wars and are touted as a route to economic development as much as cultural and political expression. The Global North recognizes that its economic future lies in finance capital and ideology rather than agriculture and manufacturing, and the Global South, too, is seeking revenue from intellectual property to supplement its minerals and masses.

The US, for instance, sells feelings, ideas, money, health, insurance, and law—niche forms of identity, AKA culture. The trend is to harness the cultural skills of the population to replace lost agricultural and manufacturing employment with jobs in music, theatre, animation, recording, radio, TV, architecture, software, design, toys, books, heritage, tourism, advertising, the web, fashion, crafts, photography, gaming, and cinema. Between 1980 and 1998, annual world exchange of electronic culture grew from US\$95 billion to US\$388 billion. PriceWaterhouseCoopers estimates that the US culture industries generated US\$428 billion in 2009, putting them ahead of aerospace, automobiles, and agriculture in monetary value. They boast an expected compound annual growth rate of 3.8% through 2014. In 2003, culture accounted for 2.3% of Gross Domestic Product across Europe, to the tune of €654 billion—more than real estate or food and drink, and equal to chemicals, plastics, and rubber. Annual global growth of 10% is predicted (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2010; Miller, 2009).

Those of us in Cultural Studies need to be experts in such matters. The revelation that 'popular culture [is] wonderful! It's so *complicated*; (Alvarado and Thompson, 1990) shouldn't impress us. The noted playwright David Edgar has mused pointedly on a neoliberal drift among culturalists:

[I]t is one of the great ironies of the project to challenge cultural paternalism and celebrate audience diversity that by undermining one bit of the ruling class, it appeared to endorse the ambitions of another. Thus did post-Marxist academia give a progressive seal of approval to letting the multicultural market rip; ... if the ultimate socialist institution is the post office, then postmodernism and poststructuralism have persuaded post-socialists to abandon playing post offices and take up playing shop (2000).

Ideas have to be concrete to make a mark on our thread, whose market and non-market principles will derive, inter alia, from the French Revolutionary cry '*liberté, égalité, fraternité*' [liberty, equality, solidarity] and the Argentine left's contemporary version '*ser ciudadano, tener trabajo, y ser alfabetizado*' [citizenship, employment, and literacy] (Martín-Barbero, 2001). The first category concerned political rights; the second, material interests; and the third, cultural representation (Rawls, 1971). Far from centralized state control constraining choice by people, we make the point that choice is generally constrained by centralized commercial control. The marginal propensity to consume is very marginal indeed for the vast majority.

This perspective connects to a skepticism about fetishizing the autonomy of style and fun from corporate and state power and their putative capacity to undermine social relations through spectacle while failing to 'contest and transform the dominant cultural, social, economic, political and linguistic formations' (Alvarado, 1981) because they ignore policies, programs and

other organizational resources for combating 'a class stratified, sexist, racist, and ageist social formation' (Alvarado and Ferguson, 1983).

So how do we to study the culture industries? And what kind of methodological and epistemological assumptions should inform our analyses? There may appear to be resonances between comprehensive studies of how texts are made and produced, how they signify, and how they are understood (for instance, Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983) and communications studies' sender-message-receiver model (Weaver and Shannon, 1963). But whereas the latter accords coeval status to the three points of the chain in a pragmatic quest for the best means of getting one's point across, we favor a much more radical position than this separation of production, meaning, and circulation allows. These processes, and knowledge of them, are interdependent, complicit parts of a political system, of a social whole. Far from being neutral, separate elements of a conveyor belt, they are mutually inscribed within each other's meanings.

Our analyses must therefore juggle multiple determinations and overdeterminations and keep the interrelationships of state, capital, pedagogy, ideology and discourse in tension, working with the recognition that ''ideology' is not an entity which can or cannot be disseminated through a medium, for that medium is itself part of an ideology' rather than 'a transparent channel through which meanings pass' (Alvarado, 1981). They seek a serious engagement with the kinds of cultural studies work that would make the connections between the production of meanings and subjectivities and the production of commodities, as well as examine the processes of determination amongst and between different levels of production. This means the rejection of the notion of autonomy (relative or not), and the recognition that cultural phenomenon, far from being autonomous texts and practices, are caught in what one might call a logic of interconnectedness of the different social levels. According to this logic, the significance of a cultural event or phenomenon—be it ideological, political, economic, or cultural—cannot be properly assessed outside a dialectical understanding of its place in society as a whole. We must learn to examine the cultural industries in the context of their social whole (which, here, refers to the concrete unity of all interacting spheres of social life under capitalism), that is, by pursuing their hidden interactions and interconnections in real life. This way we are in a better position to understand how social, economic, and political forces act on cultural production, distribution, and reception; and how cultural forces, in turn, act on the social, economic, and political.

But we do not stop here. We concur with Raymond Williams that pursuing and revealing the hidden interconnections and interactions between the economic, political, cultural and ideological is only part of the work that needs to be done and insist with him on the need to establish "the real order of determination between different kinds of activity [and levels]. That there always is such an order of determination cannot be doubted, from the historical evidence, though that it is not always the same order is equally clear. This is the necessary, theoretical base for the recognition of genuinely different social orders" (15).

Nor do we favor the reduction of culture to hermeneutic interpretation. Literary studies, for example, largely neglects 'the production, circulation and reading of texts ... the organization, ownership and interrelationships of the various publishing houses ... book advertising and the retail distribution system ... and the interrelationship between authorship, ownership and copyright' (Alvarado, 1981).

Consider television's duality, its Janus-faced capacity to witness and embody capitalism's paradoxical desire for publicity and secrecy, marketing and privacy. TV is open as a set of cultural texts, genres, and channels—but closed as a set of political-economic interests, methods, and commitments. Since the 1980s, in many parts of the world, television has opened up to the point where it now appears to welcome researchers, provided that they buy into its *faux* responsiveness to commodified audience reactions. This development has led a sizeable cohort of the credulous to swallow the Kool-Aid dispensed by mid-level media executives who just love to

expose themselves; hence Bart Beaty's telling remark that 'media studies has found its objects of study ... dictated by *Entertainment Weekly*' (2009).

So our thread will be very different from today's return to aesthetic criticism based on interpretation and identity, as per much of media and cultural studies; scientific service to militarism, business, policing, and the professions (q.v. communication studies); and the neoliberal embrace of bourgeois economics undertaken by prelates of the creative industries.

In this thread, we also realize that traditional disciplinary methods, approaches and strategies have their merits and limits, but that they work better when they are deployed together in the analysis of cultural phenomena and processes, and in this case of the culture industries. No single method is complete; and to get as close as possible to a better and more complex understanding of the cultural and media industries, combining methods becomes indispensable. As Johnson and company put it, "a multiplicity of methods is necessary because no one method is intrinsically superior to the rest and each provides a more or less appropriate way of exploring some different aspect of cultural process" (Johnson et al. 42). And it is in this nuanced sense that our thread also seeks to be interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival.

So here is an invitation: if your background is in the social sciences, try moving beyond your own experiences and methods to look at what history and textual analysis have to say. If you come from the humanities, take a peek at the law and content analysis. If you're an ethnographer, try out uses and gratifications and effects studies. If you're an audience researcher, see what political economy and environmental science have to say. If you generally work alone, try teamwork. If you only read scholarly and primary materials in one language, learn another and work with native speakers. If your thing is drama, try covering politics, and *vice versa*.

This thread calls for a radical contextualization that acknowledges the shifts and shocks that characterize the existence of institutions and texts: their ongoing renewal as the temporary property of productive workers and publics, and their stasis as the abiding property of unproductive businesspeople. It must combine political economy, ethnography, and textual analysis. A model derives from Roger Chartier's tripartite historicization of books. He aims to reconstruct 'the diversity of older readings from their sparse and multiple traces,' focusing on 'the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it,' and identifying 'the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading' of it (1989: 157, 161-63, 166). That grid turns away from reflectionist arguments that a text's key meaning lies in its overt or covert capacity to capture the *Zeitgeist*, and rejects formalism's claim that close readings of sound and image can secure definitive meanings, because texts accrete and attenuate meanings on their travels as they rub up against, trope, and are troped by other fictional and social texts and interpreted (Attallah, 2007). At the same time, we need to comprehend that culture is nested within 'corporations, advertising, government, subsidies, corruption, financial speculation, and oligopoly' (McChesney 2009: 109). As an example, the international transfer of texts needs to address sites (from trade conventions to small meetings); business models; industry actors (from independent or studio producers to buyers); texts themselves; and such contextual features as audiences, legal frameworks, and economies (Bielby and Harrington 2008: 47).

That approach fruitfully connects text to performance, in what Ian Hunter calls an 'occasion ... the practical circumstances governing the composition and reception of a piece' (1988: 215). Those circumstances may reflect, refract, or ignore social tendencies. Texts exist within a multi-form network of commercial-free and commercial-driven TV, video, CD-ROMs, the Web, DVDs, electronic games, telephones, radio, libraries, books, and multiplexes. Engagements with audiences and texts must now be supplemented by an account of the conditions under which these materials are made, circulated, received, interpreted, and criticized.

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